2: Wilson E-5 (1934-1938)1957 FN17 Ngonde FN17
Nyakyusa
Selya, MuNgonde

CHAPTER IV

THE RITUAL OF PUBERTY AND MARRIAGE

1. IN SELYA AND MUNGONDE

(*a*) *The events*

881 THE puberty ritual for girls among the Nyakyusa is fused with the
585 marriage ritual. Girls are usually betrothed well before puberty
584 and they may live with their 'husbands' for some time before they
836 grow up, for the view of most Nyakyusa is that a girl should become accustomed to her husband gradually and that it is good for her to visit him from time to time, sweeping his house, cleaning the byre, drawing water and cooking for him, and learning the art of love-making with him and no one else. While she is still very immature it is insisted that he should only have intercourse with her *inter crura*, but when she is approaching puberty he often has full intercourse with her. No legal case can be brought against him in court if he does so, provided that he has not forced or frightened her, but his friends may tell him he is foolish, and is 'teaching his wife adultery', since now he can have no proof, in the physical examination at puberty, that she has not slept with other men. No stigma attaches to the girl; if it is her husband who has deflowered her she is acclaimed in the ritual as a virgin. In some pagan families, however, notably those of chiefs, girls are not allowed to visit their husbands before puberty. The girl's father has the right to
[171] refuse it, for before the ritual a wife is only 'borrowed'. Unlike the neighbouring Bemba, the Nyakyusa are not anxious lest the girl should conceive before her first menstruation—if she should do so the ritual is performed in the ordinary way—but many fathers dislike letting their daughters go before the main bulk of the marriage cattle have been handed over. Opposition on the part of the missions and the Administration to early marriage also influences the more sophisticated. The period of betrothal is long, for pagan
● [145] girls are commonly engaged from about 8 years old onwards,
and the average age of puberty appears to be between 15 and 16.
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With the onset of first menstruation the ritual (*ubunyago bwa-usungu*) starts immediately: it is begun even for a girl not yet betrothed, though for her it cannot be completed. The main acts are a treatment of the 'bride' (*unsungu*) with medicines to fortify her against the dangers of menstruation and intercourse; seclusion at her father's homestead and a driving of the shades of his lineage from her body that she may conceive by her husband; instruction in the duties of a wife; examination for virginity; and the exchange of feasts between her husband's family and her own to celebrate her maturity and virginity.

The first treatment is with a medicine called *undumila*. 'If the girl grows up at her father's place we, her mothers, treat her at once; if at her husband's she is sent home to us, if it is near, but if it is far away, her husband's mothers treat her there.' She must take the medicine before she tastes any food after the onset of menstruation. A pungent-tasting root is pushed through the tip of a funnel or 'cup' made of a leaf of the bark-cloth tree, and salt is poured into the cup. The girl takes the tip of the root in her mouth and pulls it inward with her teeth, thus causing the salt to trickle into her mouth. Her mother also makes millet porridge and adds to it a medicine, *ikipiki*, and gives a little to her, burying the rest under the hearth of the hut.

She is then secluded in her mother's hut. Her girl friends who have not yet reached puberty prepare a litter of banana leaves for her to sit and sleep upon, and they keep her company (*ukupanja*), hence their name, *abapanji*. They come 'to cheer their fellow that she should not be left alone'. They sleep with her on the litter, and spend the greater part of their days there, learning to depilate and adorn themselves and, some say, to stretch the vagina by manual manipulation. Food for them is provided by the bride's mother, and on the litter they entertain the young men of neighbouring boys' villages, singing and dancing, and cuddling. In a bride's hut intercourse *inter crura* is permitted, and no 'husband' can claim damages if his betrothed wife lies with another young man there, unless penetration has taken place. On moonlight nights the girls

[1] Information from Christian women who knew the exact ages of their daughters and of pagan contemporaries of their daughters. Cases of first menstruation ranging from the ages of 12 to 18 were cited, but those under 14 years old were regarded as unusually young. The mothers' information was confirmed by a woman missionary who ran a school for Christian adolescent girls in the district.